John T. Draper, known as Captain Crunch, went to prison for his telephone hobby.

Capt. Crunch is 'phone phreak'

By TIM REITERMAN
Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Not many people go to prison for pursuing a hobby, but a passion for playing with exotic telephone equipment has finally put Captain Crunch in the slammer.

"It's a hobby, like CB radio — it's diddling around," the electronics whiz kid says. "Why do I do what I do? To hear a call go through, to hear all that telephone company equipment work for you, that's what you're after. Chirps, bells and tinkles."

CRUNCH, WHOSE given name is John T. Draper, reflected without regret about his hobby just before driving south to the federal prison at Lompoc, Calif. He started serving a four-month sentence Oct. 4 for defrauding Pacific Telephone Co. of $30 worth of long distance calls.

Draper, 32, has been a legendary member of the mischievous "phone phreaks," whose shenanigans and illegal long distance calls have made them natural enemies of phone companies around the globe.

Phone officials hope that his conviction, and 122 other toll fraud convictions last year, will deter phreaks and others from cheating the phone company out of an estimated $1-million in calls each year.

"The phone phreaks say they're just out for thrills, but you can say the same about a bank robber," says Joe Doherty, director of corporate security for American Telephone and Telegraph Co. "He likes to hear the alarms go off . . . but the end result is the same. A bank is robbed. These people are stealing."

The essence of phone phreaking is the imitation of electronic sound signals which trigger phone company equipment, allowing calls to be placed and routed without charge.

FOR ALL PRACTICAL purposes, the phenomenon has its roots in a cereal box. In the late 1960s, it was discovered that Captain Crunch cereal contained free plastic whistles that produced a tone of 2600 cycles per second. That frequency was a key to making a phone work for free.

Draper, with the scraggly black hair and horn-rimmed glasses of the proverbial mad scientist, learned this and other fascinating secrets after meeting a blind phreak in an accidental phone encounter.

"Then I ran into Denny, who said he had 27 ways to make free phone calls," he recalled. "Denny invited me to meet his friend Jim, who told me he would make a free call by playing certain tones on an organ into a phone.

"I told him he was crazy because I didn't think the phone company was dumb enough to have a system so easy to break into. Anyway, Jim blew my mind. He dialed an 800 (toll free) number and hit an E above middle C on the organ. All of a sudden, the 800 number disappeared with a clunk. I heard a white noise, a hissing, then he used the organ to key out the number I wanted. It worked."

Draper, with electronics training in the Air Force and San Jose City College, went home and fabricated his own organ to imitate phone signals. He fashioned a "Blue Box" a device which succeeded Captain Crunch whistles as the most prized possession in "phreakdom."

"THAT STARTED me phone phreaking," Draper said with undisguised glee. "First, I called all my friends. Then, I thought, 'Wow! Here I am with the phone company at my fingertips. Free.' "

Now using a Blue Box to make free calls is a violation of federal law, punishable by up to five years in prison and $1,000 fine.

Crunch boasts of many elaborate phone feats unsanctioned by Ma Bell.

One call, he says, was routed around the world clockwise a few times, from San Francisco to London to Sidney to San Francisco, then around the world counter-clockwise a few times, covering the equivalent of half the distance to the moon.

He describes another experiment in a room with two phones, using one to call around the world to the second. "About eight seconds after I answered one phone, I listened on the second phone and heard myself answering the first phone," he said. "It took my voice that long to travel around the world."

In Draper's realm, information is power. New information, he says is virtually controlled by about 10 super phreaks who reside in San Francisco, Seattle, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami, Denver, Hawaii, Ontario and Quebec, Canada.

ADDITIONALLY, HE says, there are numerous lower-echelon phone buffs as well as an estimated 10,000 Blue Box owners who have varying degrees of expertise in placement of free toll calls. They chat with one another and exchange information in conference calls on borrowed lines, using CB radio-type nicknames such as "The Cheshire Cat" or "Peter Perpendicular Pimple."

Last year, Draper said, he uncovered a way to use any telephone to tap virtually any telephone conversation in the country.

"I had stumbled onto the auto verify circuit," he explained. That is the circuit operators use to break into a conversation to tell a party that an emergency call is coming through.

Draper says phone companies have restricted use of the circuit to operator consoles. "But phreaks have told me they've used it to tap the FBI office in San Francisco, the Federal Communications Commission, the CIA and U.S. Customs, plus City Hall and the police here."

Doherty confirmed that the auto verify circuit was vulnerable in this area for a brief period last year.

CHARLES BATES, FBI special agent-in-charge here, declined comment on Draper's boasts, saying only: "We're always reviewing the security of our communications systems."

Crunch concedes the phone companies are finding ways to render Blue Boxes and their cousins, the Black Boxes, ineffective and are increasingly successful in detecting and prosecuting users.

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